

Dr. King's widow

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sides with his killer in pleading for new trial

By TRACY CONNOR

The widow of Martin Luther King Jr. yesterday begged a Tennessee judge to grant a trial for the man convicted of slaying the civil-rights leader, saying it's "our last hope" to learn the truth.

After hearing Coretta Scott King's impassioned plea, Shelby County Criminal Court Judge Joe Brown recommended modern ballistics tests that could lead to a trial for James Earl Ray.

If a state appeals court approves Brown's decision, high-tech tests will be performed on the hunting rifle that linked Ray to the 1968 assassination.

If the results show the gun was not the murder weapon, Ray could use that finding to petition for the trial he forfeited with his confession and guilty plea.

In a strange twist in the 28-year-old case, Mrs. King is siding with Ray, who has long maintained that his confession was coerced and that he was a dupe in a coldblooded conspiracy.

"A trial for Mr. Ray is our last hope to reveal the truth about my husband's assassination and bring about at least some sense of closure to the pain we have endured as a family over unanswered questions surrounding this tragedy," she testified.

Her son, Dexter King, said, "If this is such an open-and-shut case, why are we still being asked the question: 'Do you believe Mr. Ray killed your father?'"

The sniper attack that left King dead has long been a favorite subject of conspiracy theorists who speculate that the mob or some faction in the FBI or the military was the culprit.

Many civil-rights leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, also believe that Ray was just a dim-witted stooge set up by the real killers.

"We're all restless until we get to the bottom of all of the elements to the conspiracy to kill Dr. King," Jackson said after yester-

day's decision. "James Earl Ray was in the middle of killing Dr. King, but was not in it alone."

A bumbling small-time thief before the assassination, Ray quickly recanted his confession, but his conviction was upheld seven times.

The crusade for a trial has a new urgency because Ray, 68, is dying of cirrhosis as he serves a 99-year sentence.

Prosecutors say the new tests won't spring him from prison.

"There might have been other people involved. But to say because others were involved Ray should be released from jail is just nuts," state prosecutor John Campbell said.

Ray's lawyers want to use a scanning electron microscope to examine the Remington rifle found near Memphis' Lorraine Motel, where the 39-year-old Dr. King was gunned down on a balcony April 4, 1968.

William Pepper, one of Ray's lawyers, said the technology, in use only since the 1980s, would show once and for all whether the mangled slug that killed King was fired from the rifle that bore Ray's fingerprints.

Government tests in the

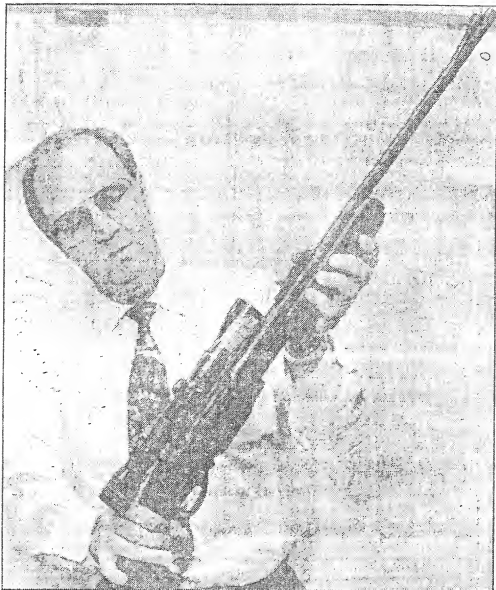
1970s to determine if the rifle was the smoking gun were inconclusive.

The results of the newer, more sophisticated tests could prove the Remington is not the murder weapon — just a “throw-down gun,” Pepper said.

Ray has insisted that a mysterious gunrunner he met in a bar, identified as “Raoul,” ordered him to buy the rifle in Alabama and bring it to Memphis. Raoul, he contends, left it at the crime scene.

At the time of the assassination, Ray was on the lam after being convicted of armed robbery in Missouri. After two months of globe-trotting during a massive manhunt, he was nabbed at London's Heathrow Airport.

King's assassination, which came during a critical period of the civil-rights movement, set off urban riots that left entire neighborhoods destroyed.



SMOKING GUN? A Tennessee judge has recommended new ballistic tests on the gun that supposedly was used to kill Dr. Martin Luther King.

AP